

WORLD Refugee Day



Bhutan

Causes of the Refugee Problem

The great majority of Bhutanese refugees are descendants of people who in the late 1800s began immigrating to southern Bhutan—lowland, malarial-infested regions shunned by the Druk Buddhist majority—in search of farmland. There they became known as *Lhotsampas* (“People of the South”).



Contact between the Druk in the north and the Lhotsampas in the south was limited, and over the years, the Lhotsampas retained their highly distinctive Nepali language, culture, and religion. Relations between the groups were for the most part conflict free. Under Bhutan’s Nationality Law of 1958, the Lhotsampas enjoyed Bhutanese citizenship and were allowed to hold government jobs.

In the 1980s, however, Bhutan’s king and the ruling Druk majority became increasingly worried about the rapidly growing Lhotsampa population. Concerned that the demographic shift could threaten the majority position and traditional Buddhist culture of the Druk, Bhutanese authorities adopted a series of policies known as *Bhutanization*, aimed at unifying the country under the Druk culture, religion, and language. The policies imposed the Druk dress code and customs on the Lhotsampas and prohibited the use of the Nepali language in schools. Nepali teachers were dismissed, and Nepali books were reportedly burned. The government also established new

eligibility requirements for Bhutanese citizenship that disenfranchised many ethnic Nepalis, depriving them of their citizenship and civil rights.

When the Lhotsampas began to organize politically to protest the policies, the authorities declared the activities subversive and unlawful. Some Lhotsampas became activists in the Bhutanese People’s Party, which called for Bhutan’s democratization. Smaller ethnic communities also began to advocate for a more democratic political system. In 1990, large-scale protests led to violent clashes with the police and army and to mass arrests. Ethnic Nepalis were targeted by the Bhutanese authorities, who destroyed the Nepalis’ property and arrested and tortured activists. Individuals were forced to sign so-called “voluntary migration certificates” before being expelled from the country. In December 1990, the authorities announced that Lhotsampas who could not prove they had been residents of Bhutan in 1958 had to leave. Tens of thousands fled to Nepal and the Indian state of West Bengal.

Need for Resettlement

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), many Bhutanese refugees say they want to return to their homes in Bhutan. Despite this desire—and despite numerous high-level meetings between the governments of Bhutan and Nepal to resolve the refugee crisis over the past 16 years—Bhutan has not permitted a single refugee to return home.

Local integration has not been possible for political reasons. Moreover, Nepali government policy denies the refugees two basic rights that are prerequisites for local integration: freedom of movement and the right to work and earn a living. Only a small number of refugees have been able to acquire legal citizenship in Nepal. This occurs through marriage or descent.

With neither repatriation nor local integration a realistic possibility for the great majority of refugees, resettlement to a third country, such as the United States, has emerged as the only durable solution to the 16-year-old problem. The plan to resettle the refugees has been a divisive issue in the camps. While many welcome the chance to begin new lives in other countries, a group of politically active refugees opposes the resettlement plan, saying that repatriation to Bhutan is the only acceptable solution.

Quick Facts

Bhutanese refugees resettled in the US during fiscal year 2008: 5,320
Bhutanese refugees resettled in the US as of September 8, 2009: 17,612
Bhutanese recognized as refugees by the UNHCR as of January 2009: 104,965
Bhutanese recognized as asylees recognized by the UNHCR as of January 2009: 1,091